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Friends with benefits and psychological wellbeing

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Abstract

This article is a descriptive study on the emotional wellbeing of individuals involved in casual sexual relations, labeled as friends with benefits. The size was 119 adults. An online survey, approved by a local, peer-review panel, was used to collect data. To explore how participants felt in this type of relationship, the instrument was organized in a total of ten categories – five positive (happy, desired, satisfied, adventurer, excited), - five negative (empty, confused, used, clumsy, deceived) Participants could select one or several categories as an answer. Overall, positive emotions were selected significantly more than negative ones, and women made up the majority of positive responses.

Keywords: Friends with benefits; emotional reactions; gender and psychological wellbeing

1. Introduction

Sexuality has traditionally been associated to steady romantic relationships, courtship and marriage. In fact, studies about sexual behavior, over the past decades, have taken place within the context of committed, serious, or formal relationships, where love, commitment and exclusivity define them (Furman & Shaffer, 2011).

In current studies on sexual behavior, a minor dichotomy exists, based on the type of interpersonal connection. On one end sits long-term relationships, characterized by romance and commitment; and on the other end sits short-term relationships, referred to as infrequent and casual sex, therefore defined as distinctly sexual. Yet,
mounting new evidence suggests that other kind of relationships exist, which do not fit said dichotomy; one of these relationships is defined as friends with benefits (Jonason, Li & Cason, 2009; Jonason, Li & Richardson, 2011; Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006).

The relationship friends with benefits refers to an emerging sexual relation (Bisson and Levine, 2009). Framed as casual, it is about sex among friends; one that brings together friendship (i.e. psychological intimacy), and physical closeness void of romantic liaisons (Lehmiller, VanderDrift & Kelly, 2011; Owen & Fincham, 2011a; Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005; McGinty, Knox & Zusman, 2007). This type of relationship seems widespread among young adults, and for researchers remains available for further study (Lonardo, Manning, Giordano & Longmore, 2010; Wentland and Reissing, 2011; Furman & Shaffer, 2011; Hughes et al., 2005; Green & Morman 2008).

While clearly a subset of casual sexual relations, the “friends with benefits” type contains features inherently romantic - namely intimacy and sexual passion. For this reason, it is considered a hybrid relationship, one that is not clearly romantic, nor true friendship, yet it does exhibit aspects of both (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Lehmiller et al., 2011).

2. Psychological Wellbeing.

The Pan-American Health Organization, and the World Health Organization in collaboration with the International Association of Sexology (WAS) have defined sexual health as the permanent, lived process of physical, psychological and sociocultural fulfilment linked to sexuality (OPS & OMS, 2000, p.15).

Psychological wellbeing is a component of sexual health (Levin, 2007; Carrobles, Gámez-Guadix and Almendros, 2011; Victoria and González, 2000). Psychological wellbeing, indeed, manifests a person’s constructive and positive feeling about herself; it is lived subjectively and is connected to the person’s physical, psychological, and social functioning. Moreover, it brings together reactive and transitional elements linked to the emotions, and to cognitive, more stable, evaluative elements. Both – emotion and cognition – certainly are interconnected.

Within a sexual health framework, one wonders whether friends with benefits provide positive emotional reactions and, that way contribute to the participants’ psychological wellbeing, or rather affects them negatively. This very aspect remains controversial and unsettled among experts, due to, as argued above, the fact that friends with benefits do not constitute a pure relationship, and the studies on the subject seem scarce.

Traditionally, researchers have linked friendship and romantic relationships to psychological wellbeing (Corrigan and Phelan, 2004; Manning, Longmore & Giordano, 2005), while casual sex has been related to negative emotional reactions, or psychological uneasiness (Grello, Welsh, Harper & Dickson, 2003; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Owen & Fincham, 2011b). These negative emotional reactions have also been related to psychological illness (Owen & Fincham 2011a; Grello et al. 2003, García, Reiber, Massey & Merriwether, 2012). Some studies have pointed out that sexual tension is common among participants in friends with benefits, and such tension creates uncertainty (Afifi and Faulkner, 2000).

Nevertheless, some studies have found that young adults involved in friends with benefits relationships do not risk higher negative psychological consequences than those who do not participate in this type of relation (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick and Neumark-Sztainer, 2009). At the contrary, emotional reactions outweigh negative ones for males and females (Owen & Fincham 2011a,b; Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter & Kilmer, 2012).

The high number of young adults involved in friends with benefits may explain the positive value assigned to this type of relationship (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; McGinty et al., 2007; Puentes, Knox & Zusman, 2008; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Weaver, Mackeigan and MacDonald, 2011). These participants expect, and indeed, extract a positive result from such relationships (Weaver et al., 2011). In other words, it cannot be definitely concluded that psychological stress is significantly correlated to friends with benefits (Owen and Fincham, 2011a,b).
3. Gender and emotional experience.

This section examines whether a difference on emotional experiences exists between males and females involved in friends with benefits. That is, whether gender - as social and cultural construct of the feminine and the masculine (Lamas, 1999) – is related to the friends with benefits phenomenon. But, first let’s agree that meanings and emotions emanating from this type of relationship may vary by gender (Glenn & Marguardt, 2001; Paul, MacManus & Hayes, 2000; Owen & Fincham, 2011a,b).

More women than men appear to qualify their experience in a friends with benefits as important. But they also do not want to go back to have it in higher numbers than men (Bell, 1981; Owen an Fincham, 2011 b; Lewis, et al., 2012). Women seem to have less positive emotional reactions compared to men (Fincham & Owen 2011a, b; Lewis et al., 2012); women also feel more uncomfortable and guilty than men. In addition, they seem less costumed to casual sex than men. Thus, casual sex can be considered as predictor of sexual guilt among female university students (Eshbauhg and Gute, 2008; Campbell, 2008).

New studies over the last years have revealed new findings contradicting the extant literature on sexual gender roles. The New York Times published a piece on July, 2013, dealing with this very subject. Kate Taylor, the author, discusses about a whole new generation of women whose sexual opportunities and relationships have changed. It can be said that there seems to coexist a bipolar and ambiguous environment – i.e. traditional and alternative sexual life - and that changes in sexual behavior have ushered the end of many stigmas associated with sex, such as premarital sex, and female sexual expression (Green & Morman 2008).

Again, the complexity of friends with benefits seems obvious. Yet, it remains unclear whether involvement in this type of sexual relationship offers pleasure and fulfilment particularly to women. Many unknown elements still remain concealed.

4. Purpose

The central purpose of this study was to analyse the emotional state of those involved in friends with benefits relationships. Two specific objectives guided this work:

- Understand the emotional reactions of those involved in friends with benefits.
- Differentiate the emotional reactions of men and women.

5. Methodology

This is a descriptive survey research (Arnal, del Rincón & Latorre, 1992). Se utilizó un cuestionario online adaptado from Owen and Fincham (2001b).

Participants

This study was part of a larger research project aiming at understanding couple’s relationships. The sample size of this larger project was 1073 individuals. From these participants, 11% (a total of 119 respondents) stated they are involved in friends with benefits. This study focuses exclusively on the latter subset of the large sample. Of the 119 respondents, about one quarter (a total of 31) were male, and the rest (88) female. Mean average age was about 24 years. Almost 91% stated their sexual orientation as heterosexual, almost 2% as gay, 7% as bisexual, and almost 1% as pansexual.

Instrument

An online survey containing a total of fourteen dimensions was provided. The survey followed indicators found in the literature thus far reviewed. A team of nine methods experts and sexologists offered critical feedback to each item.
Respondents who identified themselves as currently involved in friends with benefits were directed to the instrument’s section dealing with it. This was option “b” of question: What types of relationship are you now involved?

Other respondents were directed to the sections corresponding to the type of casual sexual involvement they identified as having – unknown individuals, acquaintances, or romantic. People not involved in any type of these relationships were discontinued.

More concretely, this article is based on the findings of the dimension - emotions related to psychological wellbeing of individuals engaged in friends with benefits.

Results

Data were analysed using Statistical Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS V. 20).

Emotional reactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>% Men</th>
<th>% Women</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>32,3</td>
<td>52,3</td>
<td>47,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired</td>
<td>41,9</td>
<td>40,9</td>
<td>41,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>32,3</td>
<td>43,2</td>
<td>40,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventurer</td>
<td>22,6</td>
<td>27,3</td>
<td>26,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>25,8</td>
<td>27,3</td>
<td>26,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty</td>
<td>6,5</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confuse</td>
<td>19,4</td>
<td>29,5</td>
<td>26,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used</td>
<td>9,7</td>
<td>4,5</td>
<td>5,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clumsy</td>
<td>9,7</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceived</td>
<td>9,7</td>
<td>6,8</td>
<td>4,6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Men, as well as women, reported that their emotional reactions were more positive than negative. The most frequent was happy (47.1%), followed by desired (41.2%), satisfied (40.3%), excited and confused (both 26.9%), adventurer (26.1%), deceived (7.6%), used (5.9%); lastly, empty and clumsy (4.2%). It can be stated that, participants experienced the five positive categories more frequently, thus contributing to their psychological wellbeing. A higher percentage of women than men showed positive emotional reactions. As for negative emotional reactions, men showed a higher level than women, in all categories, except “confused” where women showed a higher percentage than men. A Chi-square test showed no significant difference.
Benefits

Table 2. Benefits for Men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Avoiding commitment</th>
<th>Having relations with an acquaintance</th>
<th>Trust and safety</th>
<th>Avoiding exclusivity</th>
<th>Being close to my friend</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4.232</td>
<td>0.517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>7.020</td>
<td>0.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5.099</td>
<td>0.404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventurer</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.514</td>
<td>0.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>6.160</td>
<td>0.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.568</td>
<td>0.613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confused</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6.337</td>
<td>0.275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.857</td>
<td>0.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clumsy</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.580</td>
<td>0.469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceived</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.857</td>
<td>0.570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.001

Male participants have shown more positive than negative emotions. Avoiding commitment is the central benefit for men involved in friends with benefits. They also listed gaining confidence and safety. Additionally, \( \chi^2 \) appears as statistically insignificant throughout all beneficial emotions for men.

Table 3. Benefits for Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Avoiding commitment</th>
<th>Having relations with an acquaintance</th>
<th>Trust and safety</th>
<th>Avoiding exclusivity</th>
<th>Being close to my friend</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>16.171</td>
<td>0.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>4.642</td>
<td>0.461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>4.349</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventurer</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>6.665</td>
<td>0.247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>3.430</td>
<td>0.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empty</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>11.870</td>
<td>0.037*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confused</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6.351</td>
<td>0.274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>6.157</td>
<td>0.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clumsy</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>9.987</td>
<td>0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceived</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.052</td>
<td>0.888</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.001

Female participants have shown more positive than negative emotions. Avoiding commitment is the central benefit for women involved in friends with benefits. They also listed gaining confidence and safety, when having a relationship with an acquaintance. Those who expressed a negative emotional state, chose avoiding commitment as a way to gain trust and safety, while the other categories may not provide benefits. When looked at emotional expressions, women selected emptiness. The benefit they described has to do with having a relationship with an acquaintance, otherwise no benefit exists, where \( \chi^2 \) 11,870 and p<0.05.
6. Conclusions.

The purpose of this study was to research the relationships among young adults. More concretely, it was examined the emotional reactions – positive and negative – and the differentiation along gender lines. As discussed above, these emotional reactions are linked to the participants’ psychological wellbeing, and sexual health. These results are consistent with studies suggesting that participants in friends with benefits - and in general in casual relationships – express positive emotional reactions and contribute to their psychological wellbeing.

When looking across gender, the results suggest new elements. As a reminder, Owen and Fincham (2011a,b) found that emotional reactions were positive among men, and less among women. But in the study here presented, it was found that positive emotional reactions are more prevalent than negative ones. Furthermore, women showed higher incidence of positive emotional reactions than men. These new findings seem coherent with the theories that consider traditional sexual roles going through profound transformations (See for instance Green, 2008; Taylor, 2013).

Given the sample size, these findings must be considered carefully. But, regardless, these findings should help to discern future research on the subject, especially around the psychological wellbeing and sexual health of those involved in friends with benefits.

Acknowledgments

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References


